

## Notes for House Education Committee

My son, Tommy just turned 5. He's in a regular preschool, class and will be starting kindergarten in the fall. This is possible, in large part, due to the early education interventions available in Northville for children with special needs.

Tommy had fluid in his ears and chronic ear infections for the first 18 months of his life. We knew he could hear us, because he was an engaged and responsive little guy. But, while he made some sounds, he said nothing that could mistaken for a word even by the most eager and worried parents. He had ear tubes placed at 18 months and we were assured by the ENT that we would notice a difference in his speech within two weeks. Two months later he wasn't even calling me Mama. When I watched my 9 month old niece use more words and sounds than Tom at a Labor Day picnic when he was 20 months I knew we needed help.

I contacted the speech/language pathologist at my older daughters' school. She put me in touch with the special ed. department who, after a phone interview agreed that Tom needed to be tested. Within a month of that Labor Day picnic Tom was enrolled in the Early On program in the Wayne Westland Schools. This program consisted of playgroup therapy for 1.5 hours weekly and a 1 hour home visit weekly, as well. Tom participated in the Early On program for a year and a half and was released as "speaking within the average range" at age 3.

Tommy entered the Smart Start program in the Northville Public schools at age 3.5. While he was adding new words and phrases by leaps and bounds, he had slipped to just below the average range during his 6 month hiatus from therapy. He participated in the Smart Start program during the 2004-2005 school year. The Smart Start program is conducted in Northville. The children meet in a very small group for 1.5 hours a week. They work on both gross and fine motor skills, which (I have learned) helps the brain to coordinate the two. This is especially important for Tom since (I have also learned) speech is the "finest of fine motor skills." The children are taught by a speech pathologist and a social worker.

As a parent, I learned a lot about how to work with my son to help him along without frustrating him. I was offered valuable information from both the Early On and Smart Start programs. I was also offered chances to further my knowledge in workshops and study groups.

These are two quality programs that provide support to children with special needs, and education to parents, so that they can be partners in their child's education at the earliest point, when it can make the most impact. It is my hope that programs such as these will be available to all Michigan children. If we are expecting children to be reading out of kindergarten, then we need quality early intervention programs available to everyone who needs them.

As I said at the beginning, Tommy is now a bright, just turned 5 year old, in a regular preschool class. He knows all his letters, most of the sounds and is beginning to read and write some words. He is easily understood by all he meets, and with the exception of inviting people over to "ours house" there is little to concern me about his speech. I know that this is due to the fact that we had support available very early in his life, and were taught how to help him improve.

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